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Mindfulness Practices in Online Learning: Supporting Learner Self-Regulation

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This collective autoethnography discusses the effects of mindfulness practices integrated into an online Master of Education course at a Canadian Distance Education university. While the M.Ed. program is designed to address challenges typically associated with online courses, such as spatial and temporal distance, lower levels of synchronous interaction with peers and instructors, balancing flexibility and autonomy, as well as feeling isolated, the authors initially found themselves overwhelmed by the pressures stemming from competing responsibilities and emotional demands of being an online learner. They report on how the mindfulness practices, introduced mid-way through the program, impacted their online learning experience and their personal lives beyond the program. One of the key aspects of the marked growth was their improved self-regulated learning (SRL) skills that are essential for online learners. The chief mindfulness-supported habits that the authors found to positively affect the forethought, performance, and self-reflection processes were enhanced intrinsic motivation, self-awareness, and a mindful approach to time management.

This autoethnographical report reflects on our learning in the Master of Education (M.Ed.) program at a Canadian online university between September 2016 and April 2018. During that time, we participated in ten online courses that culminated with e-portfolio artifacts and presentations. We, four graduates of the program, report on the effects of mindfulness practices in online learning as experienced by the student and explored under the guidance of our instructor, Dr. Aga. She introduced us to these contemplative practices which significantly impacted our online learning experience and our lives beyond the program—prac-

tices that helped us to better connect on an emotional, meta-cognitive, psychological, and creative level and to fully listen to ourselves and others, practices that helped us be aware, be with the pleasant or unpleasant without fear, with choice, always in the midst of change.

The M.Ed. program is housed at Athabasca University (AU), a distance learning university of 50 years and one of the world's leading open universities. The program's primary focus is on "learning that helps students overcome the barriers of time and space" (Athabasca University, 2020). All M.Ed. courses are offered online employing a variety of learning platforms and communication tools to enable flexible yet connected learning. The M.Ed. and Ed.D. programs at AU are designed to address challenges typically associated with online courses, including but not limited to spatial and temporal distance; lower levels of synchronous interaction; balancing flexibility and autonomy; and feeling isolated and overwhelmed, especially when new to digital learning (Palalas, 2017).

The M.Ed. program opened its doors to a cohort of students from Greece; we were amongst the group who joined in 2016. In the fall of 2017, we joined Dr. Aga's course, Introduction to Mobile Learning ("the M-learning course"). Dr. Aga had taught us earlier M.Ed. courses, but this one was unique in that it was redesigned to include mindfulness strategies. Dr. Aga was exploring how mindfulness strategies, already proven successful across a variety of face-to-face educational contexts (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; David & Sheth, 2009; Palalas et al., 2018, p. 87), could be incorporated into online environments to enhance the digital learning experience. Selected mindfulness-based practices (described below) were employed to support student metacognitive skills and first-person investigations through which to foster awareness, concentration, and insight by way of critical self-inquiry and connection with others.

As demonstrated herein, these practices positively affected our experience during and beyond the course, both in our personal and professional lives. We ensured rigour and accuracy when analyzing our experience to avoid negative effects of "mindfulness hype" (Van Dam et al., 2018). In retrospect, it took time to develop and fully appreciate some new mind habits enabled by these practices. The perceptions presented in this article have been enriched by the perspective of time; our story

chronicles the evolution of these perceptions from before the M-learning course until the completion of this article.

One of the key aspects of our growth was the improved learner self-regulation skills that are essential for online learners (Wong et al., 2019). This article highlights the importance of self-regulated learning (SRL; defined below) in our Distance Education (DE) experience and how mindfulness practices supported various aspects of SRL. The reported findings arose from the dialogue on experiences documented in our personal journals, individual self-inquiries, group discussions, and the process of writing two collective autobiographies.

DEFINITION OF MINDFULNESS

The definition adopted for this study was put forth by Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994) who introduced a secular-clinical mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) intervention in 1990. He defined mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145), inviting us to give full intentional attention to the here and now (including the surroundings, our feelings, emotions, and their impact), and to be open and accepting to whatever comes up. Kabat-Zinn (2003) also distinguished seven attitudinal foundations of mindfulness practice, namely, non-judging, patience, beginner’s mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance, and letting go. Well-designed mindfulness practices “at their root [have] practices in strengthening attention” (Goleman & Davidson, 2017, p. 306). Mindfulness requires regular “mind training” through mind-body practices such as mindful breathing, yoga, meditation, art, dance, and more (Ergas, 2019). Paying attention out of choice is particularly important in the online learning space where our minds are distracted and overwhelmed by numerous competing stimuli, often deliberately designed to grab our attention without consent (Levy, 2016; Palalas, 2018).

MINDFULNESS PRACTICES IN THE M-LEARNING COURSE

Our experience and reflections stem from the M-learning course—one of the electives in the online M.Ed. program, which comprised ten 13-week courses and culminated in an e-portfolio. The course invited students

to experience firsthand M-learning pedagogy, technology, and instructional designs, offering a cross-platform option of accessing it both on tethered computers and mobile devices. There were seven units, two individual and two collaborative assignments, seven discussion forums, and four 90-minute synchronous Adobe Connect sessions, which students were encouraged to attend in real time; they were recorded for those who could not participate in the live events.

The course had been refined in its last three iterations to incorporate evidence-based mindfulness-based activities and resources, both asynchronous and synchronous. The teaching and learning strategies had been updated to create an inviting virtual space where students would feel connected yet unrestricted, challenged yet supported—a meeting place characterized by openness, flexibility, and responsibility for one's own learning. Dr. Aga guided us through our learning journey, raising the bar and gradually removing scaffolds whenever we were ready. The course design was imbued with her caring presence. It was underpinned by the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001), a process-oriented approach that promoted higher levels of cognitive, teaching, and social (including emotional) presence. Based on collaborative constructivist principles, the course design supported students in gradually becoming self-directed learners with strong self-regulation skills. That required consistent learner participation in discussion forums and interaction through group activities (communication and collaboration) leading to knowledge co-creation (Vygotsky, 1980). Once predominantly asynchronous, with advancements of technology and shifts in online pedagogy, online learning has increasingly blended synchronous and asynchronous spaces and opportunities to harmonize individual and collaborative learning. Dr. Aga actively guided us in the process and monitored our individual progress to gauge learners' readiness to become increasingly autonomous so that some scaffolding and supports could be progressively removed.

The main mindfulness practices included the following:

- introduction to mindfulness concepts and practice through a Mindfulness Discussion Forum and two synchronous meetings, including resources, discussions, and group inquiry;

- three- to 10-minute meditation at the opening of live sessions followed by debriefing, check-ins, and intention setting;
- selected practices from the Greater Good in Action website (<https://ggia.berkeley.edu>), mainly loving-kindness, mindful breathing, raisin meditation, body scan, walking meditations, and pausing for individual practice outside of the class time with encouragement/reminders for daily practice;
- self-reflection through journaling, notes to self, and self-inquiry prompted by questions regarding individual understanding of authentic meaningful learning;
- mindful listening and speaking practices (small group guided activities in live sessions);
- creating a safe online learning environment based on collective understanding of “safe” and an invitation to trust the process, trust self-knowing, and trust the learning community, guided by “flexible structure” that offers space for individual learning and guideposts to motivate and show the direction;
- virtual reminders, questions to ponder, and encouraging notes (via reminder.com);
- digital wellness tools to minimize distraction and focus attention on “the now” and the task at hand (e.g., a reminder to close all the other software windows when in the Adobe Connect session; negotiated offline time for “digital detox” with no expectation from the students or teacher to be online);
- invitation to exercise choice based on awareness of self and circumstances (e.g., choice of assignment topics, format, and due date extensions);
- mindful feedback from the instructor based on dialogue and inquiry;
- “mindful, respectful, and relational language to express messages of support, gratitude, and compassion, balanced out with constructive feedback and critique” (Palalas et al., 2018, p. 88).

More detailed description and discussion of these practices is available in Palalas et al. (2018).

SELF-REGULATED LEARNING

Self-regulated learning (SRL) skills, explored in traditional learning contexts since the 1980s (e.g., Zimmerman, 1989), have been also viewed as critical in online learning that is characterized by higher levels of learner autonomy and physical absence of the instructor (Lehmann, Hähnlein, & Ifenthaler, 2014). Zimmerman (2008), a key researcher of the notion, described SRL as “the self-directive processes and self-beliefs that enable learners to transform their mental abilities, such as verbal aptitude, into an academic performance skill, such as writing” (p. 166). Zimmerman observed that these proactive processes “stem from advantageous motivational feelings and beliefs as well as metacognitive strategies” (p. 167). To activate these processes, learners need “personal initiative, perseverance, and adaptive skill” (p. 167). Panadero (2017) advocated for a holistic approach when considering SRL and its many dimensions, including cognitive, metacognitive, behavioral, motivational, and emotional, and how they interrelate to affect learning.

While there are various models of SRL, the cyclical phases model by Zimmerman and colleagues (Zimmerman, 2000; Zimmerman & Campillo, 2003) has been most common in the digital learning literature (Palalas & Wark, 2020; Wong et al., 2019). Underpinned by social cognitive theory, the model comprises three phases: forethought, performance, and self-reflection. It emphasizes “both motivational factors and learning strategies in highly autonomous learning environments” (Wong et al., 2019, p. 357) such as online learning. The model underwent some refinements in Zimmerman and Moylan (2009) and the resultant three cyclical phases included the following processes:

- forethought: task analysis (i.e., goal setting and strategic planning) and self-motivation beliefs (i.e., self-efficacy, outcome expectations, intrinsic interest/value, goal orientation);
- performance: self-control processes (i.e., task strategies, self-instruction, imagery, time management, environmental

structuring, help-seeking, interest incentives, self-consequences) and self-observation (i.e., metacognitive monitoring, self-recording);

- self-reflection: self-judgment (i.e., self-evaluation, causal attribution) and self-reaction (i.e., self-satisfaction/affect, adaptive/defensive).

Through these phases, learners self-regulate their learning metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviourally. We asked ourselves what new mind habits—attitudinal, emotional, or behavioural—we developed during the course that allowed us to successfully participate in these SRL processes. We then documented our own perceptions on how mindfulness-based practices affected our self-regulation in learning.

METHODOLOGY: COLLECTIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

The chosen methodology for this study was collective autoethnography, which combines characteristics from both autobiography and ethnography. It allowed us to describe and analyze our personal experiences, extending the analysis, and building on the literature and theory (Bennett & Folley, 2014). It gave voice to individual perspectives captured in original stories, in our case resulting in a collective account, to advance sociological understanding and extrapolate wider social, political, and cultural meanings (Ellis, 1997, 2004; Wall, 2008). Autoethnography is a transformative research that offers to science individuality and subjectivity; it requires vulnerability in order to change perceptions (Custer, 2014). Autoethnography has proven to be appropriate for this exploration as it fosters empathy, embodies creativity and innovation, eliminates boundaries, invites and honors subjectivity, and provides therapeutic benefits.

In this article, we describe our experience with mindfulness-based learning and teaching strategies implemented in an online course. The stories of the four of us have been combined and retold as a collective narrative. This shared experience commenced when Dr. Aga invited us to explore mindfulness and to approach the inquiry with curiosity and a “beginner’s mind,” to replace intellectual analysis with “first person knowing,” and to document the experience and insights in a journal. An

invitation from Dr. Aga to co-write and present a conference paper followed, which marked the beginning of this collective autoethnographical process.

We contributed our insiders' perspectives based on individual journal entries and observations collected over two years starting in September 2017 as well as our group oral and written communication (via Skype, face-to-face, emails, text messages, and telephone). We held regular Skype meetings and engaged in co-writing our autoethnography using Google docs. Thus, the first collective narrative was created through retrospective inquiry, conversation, and re-examination of concepts and understanding which led to iterative rewriting of our story. Excerpts from our personal learning journals and researcher notes were merged into a collective database that we subsequently analyzed for key themes through systematic debriefing, sharing, negotiating the meaning of our observations, and interpretations (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2016)—our first draft was thus created. The dialogue continued when we met to co-present our first paper on mindfulness at an academic conference in Poland in April 2018. We dug deeper into our experiences when rehearsing the presentation, co-presenting, and answering audience questions. These shared events became a source of further self-reflexive inquiries into the concepts, processes, and feelings related to the use of mindfulness in online education. As more questions and insights arose, we made a decision to continue with this inquiry process, which proved to be both challenging and empowering. We decided to co-write a second autoethnography that documented our findings focusing on the effects of mindful practices on learner self-regulation.

Next, in our multiple rewrites of the draft, we revisited and scrupulously analyzed all data, our personal accounts and discussions recorded in our notes, versions of the manuscript, and communication to identify any emergent habits that promoted our SRL. This joint analysis and writing process led to the distillation of three key themes representing our most common shared reflections that culminated in collective conclusions expressed as one voice.

STUDENTS' STORY

Meet the Students

Student 1 (S1): 39 years old, married, working mother of one ten-year old girl, husband with MS, usually collaborating with three to five different organizations, located in North Greece.

When I joined the M.Ed. program, it was because of internal motivation. My job did not require me to, neither did I have any spare time. In fact, I had several doubts about it, and time management and financial challenges were making me indecisive....I made a call to ask if I could still enroll. When the secretary asked me if I was interested in the program, I felt awkward, not knowing the answer and I spontaneously answered: "I made the call, so I guess I want to take this program.

Student 2 (S2): 36 years old, married, mother of two: an eleven-year-old boy and an eight-year-old girl, working part time online, located in Central Greece.

Self-improvement is a factor that plays a significant role in my goal-setting. I aim at lifelong learning and being up-to-date in my field. I considered this master's program as a great opportunity to specialize in something new and learn about ways of integrating technology in my job. Also, I thought it was a great opportunity to broaden my teaching limits in multicultural environments and pursue a better job position in distance education. The most interesting part, though, was that this program would be a step further to an academic career. I was always fascinated by research and the creativity of academic work, but, due to family obligations, I had put aside this part for long.

Student 3 (S3): 31 years old, married, mother of a four-year-old boy, working full time in the public sector in the northern part of Greece.

A couple of years ago I decided that it was a good time to start a postgraduate program. After a long research, I found that the M.Ed. at Athabasca fulfilled all my criteria. It seemed very interesting as distance learning was new in my country. It was very challenging...I would have the opportunity to improve my oral and writing skills in English while also become familiar with a different educational system.

Student 4 (S4): 42 years old, divorced, single mother of a sixteen-year-old boy, working full time as an elementary school teacher in Canada.

I entered this M.Ed. program pushed mainly by external motivation. The “rewards” at the end of the program (an increase in pay and employment perspectives) were the initial driving forces. It had been difficult financially to raise my son as a single parent and I wanted to be able to provide more for my family. The choice of a distance education focus was the result of potentially expanding and diversifying my employment opportunities, while the acquisition of a master’s meant an increase in my pay as an educator and the ability to become an administrator. I was also fond of the idea of having a master’s title, which, too, would serve as a reward for my hard work.

Embarking on the M.Ed. Journey

Although we were experienced learners, early on in our DE journey we recognized a need to develop online-learning-specific skills to effectively meet the demands of the program. We needed to take responsibility, plan, monitor, and make strategic choices at each stage of the learning process, to a much greater extent than in traditional learning. The paradox of the preconceived flexibility of DE versus the actual scheduled deliverables, and the desired independence versus the reality of cohort-reliance and interdependence, became obvious. The design of the M.Ed. courses encouraged us to learn deep and engage amply, and the resources and supports were there for us to interact with anytime anywhere...but our own time and resources were running thin.

Before the beginning of the classes, I thought they would not be particularly difficult because the program was flexible and without exams. However, the first few weeks of my studies showed me how wrong my original assumption was. I started to realize that I had to develop a completely different way of learning. I understood what it meant for a class to be learner-centered and what it feels like to discover new knowledge. But that was not easy. I began to feel anxious. Due dates were close, and I did not have time to participate in the forums while the use of the English language was delaying me. I decided (not without anxiety) that I had to lower my standards. (S3)

From the very beginning of this master's program, I realized the differences between face-to-face and distance education...my patterns of studying had to be adjusted to the demands of the new learning environment. While the learner-centered approach allowed me to participate more actively in the learning experience, I was also fully responsible for my success. Studying the material was not enough. I had to upgrade my media literacies to maintain social interaction and, simultaneously, demonstrate my progress through constant writing in forums and assignments. I would not allow myself to ask for extensions, so I had to be exceptionally effective in time management. Fortunately, my internal motivation was extremely high. (S2)

Today we had our first meeting as a cohort. I got to meet the other students and asked our coordinator many questions. Overall, it seems like there's a good support system in place, but I can't lie that I'm a bit scared of the workload ahead after hearing that some students spent 3 to 4 hours every day on the program. I don't have that kind of time. How will I do it? (S4)

As we were struggling with competing demands on our time and energy, we found refuge in our integration into the Greek cohort—our own community in the new AU space.

Before the M-learning Course

Despite the established connection within the cohort, the onus was on individual students to fit the online studies into our already busy lives—our family and professional obligations limited the time available for studying. Combined with the necessity to become proficient at the digital channels of interacting with content and people, this led to an increase in our anxiety levels which hindered our learning experience. The program was designed to offer gradual progression and guidance marked by assignment due dates and discussion forum end dates, but we instead felt stressed by the deadlines which were weighing us down. In fact, one of us (S1) found it impossible to manage the challenges of work and study during the first term:

[T]hat period, I was facing several challenges at work. These made me experience sadness, fear, and uncertainty. Although I am very familiar with distance education, being a student in such a demanding program was a “mission impossible” at that time. The combination of work and studying stress, turned to panic attacks that forced me to withdraw from one of the two courses. (S1) Adjusting to this new reality was particularly difficult; however, participating in group work and synchronous class sessions allowed us to become better acquainted, and gradually we started talking more outside the requirements of the program through Skype, Messenger, and phone. Soon enough, we were able to share information, reflections, and ways to support each other, and we agreed on the importance of self-regulating strategies to ameliorate the challenges we shared as DE learners.

Everything started to improve when I first met S2 during a collaborative assignment. We began to not only ex-

change information, concerns, and thoughts about the classes but also to help each other. At the beginning of the second term, I knew how I could better fulfil my responsibilities. I decided that the only time I had were weekend evenings, since my two-year-old son at the time needed me, and I could rarely spare time for studying. I knew I had to plan all my work very carefully in the time I had. This *intentional* schedule improved my performance. (S3)

Introducing Mindfulness Practices

The mindfulness practices introduced by Dr. Aga in the M-learning course came as a surprise. We needed lots of guidance. With time and practice we experienced what was meant by present-moment awareness and insight which allowed us to uncover our true motives, manage our attention, apply more focused purpose to our learning, and approach the online learning experience with more agency and less anxiety. The consistent practice for the 13 weeks of the course, and beyond (not all of us to the same extent) contributed to improving our self-regulation skills and the overall program experience. We gradually were able to see more opportunities than constraints in the requirements and choices offered by the course; for instance, seeing the discussion forum posts as a chance to express our personal knowledge, rather than providing “the correct” answer (an expression of self-motivating and self-recording).

Dr. Aga encouraged us to be sincere in our self-inquiry, to stay curious and kind to ourselves, and to allow self-expression so that we could all bring the best of ourselves to our shared space and to the world (through our service as educators). She explained that there was no failure but instead our knowing was in constant evolution. We could rewrite our submissions multiple times (and raise our mark) until we decided that we were satisfied, which inspired self-evaluation and self-satisfaction. We had a chance to rethink and rewrite our “story.” The whole class agreed that the discussion forum space was a platform to weave our own understanding of M-learning notions into the “larger story” of the “accepted” theory, but there were no right or wrong answers. Respect for each

other's opinion was expected as we all participated in the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. Dr. Aga stressed that it was okay to be vulnerable and to ask for help when needed, to celebrate our unique ways, and to come to knowing by looking inward (self-reflection) and connecting outward when ready (self-instruction, help-seeking, and collaboration). We were invited to slow down (while our instructor was monitoring and adjusting the course due dates) and create space for insight and perspective so that the individual and then the collective voice could enter the space we co-created. We needed to do our part that involved all SRL processes at various times. We were invited to keep our learning journals and to always self-inquire what our intention was behind our choices and strategies.

I can see the difference in my self-reflection notes which I keep more often. It seems that I have acquired the ability to better observe my thoughts and understand my feelings. This has enhanced my metacognitive processes and has made me realize ways of using new knowledge in real-life tasks. Now, I can clearly see the purpose of self-reflection exercises after each assignment in our courses. They help learners decode their behaviours and the cause behind them. Furthermore, they help understand others' behaviours and appreciate their perspective. Ultimately, this contributes to acquiring the ability of distilling knowledge and personalizing it. Prompted by our instructor to write some advice for distance learners in our blogs, I wrote the following: Through this challenging learning journey in distance education KEEP A JOURNAL of your experiences because they matter. You are the one who drives yourself through these experiences and this is more important than a theory that will tell you how you should feel. (S2)

[W]hile I always maintained that external motivation to stay on track and keep my eyes on the "prize," I soon realized that without internal motivation, my studies would be a long and arduous process. I needed to

develop genuine curiosity and interest in the subject matter and find ways to personalize my learning, so it becomes more relevant, meaningful, and enjoyable to me. Mindfulness brought me to a clearer, deeper understanding of my motives. I re-evaluated my goals, grew as a professional, and matured as a person. While the external rewards still remain, becoming present in the moment and fully emerged in my learning created a new-found enthusiasm and appreciation in the subject matter. Being able to recognize my present intention, focus on it, and be true to myself, stimulated my internal motivation to design projects that I could also implement in my teaching and share with my educational community. This has increased my feelings of self-worth and has given me the confidence to talk about and advocate distance education. (S4)

Mindful speaking and deep listening practice during the live sessions guided us to active listening and better collaboration with our peers, especially during group assignments. It also triggered self-control and self-observation as we were able to monitor our chatty minds and the effects of silence on human-to-human interaction.

The growth-encouraging feedback from Dr. Aga, inviting students' input and rewrites, allowed us to learn from our mistakes and improve our academic skills. Her feedback was provided as dialogue, in which students were asked to reply to instructor's inquiries and expressions of praise, using in-line comments; they could also rewrite parts of the assignment and resubmit at any time of the course. It inspired further reflection, honoured learning through errors, invited revisions (as many as needed), and turned assessments into welcomed opportunities as opposed to threats. We took responsibility for our assignments as expressions of our own ideas that we wanted to showcase—we still needed "to do the work" and activate our "self" skills of task analysis, performance, and reflection. The "flexible structure" of the course with recommended yet negotiable deadlines also helped.

Making intentional choices regarding my tasks, asking what was conducive to my learning and what was about grades, improved my time management skills which made my studying more effective. My work became more focused and more succinct. Mindful communication and feedback from my instructor and peers also enhanced my academic achievement. On the one hand, this attentive dialogic feedback made me feel included in the learning process and directly involved in my academic growth. My communication with my instructors and peers gained new clarity and calm. I felt respected and acknowledged. On the other hand, practicing mindfulness helped me put the feedback I was given in perspective: that it was not intended to judge but to support. As well, I was able to detach myself from emotional reactions when the feedback would not meet my expectations and truly deal with it in an effective and mature way, learning and growing from it. (S4)

We were learning to be more self-aware of how we reacted emotionally and behaviourally. Through reminders and questions, Dr. Aga invited us to check with our own reactions and reflect on what actions or reactions followed. During the forums and group assignments, we were asked to engage in self- and peer-to-peer reflection on our preferences, needs, and the learning process. The learning journals offered a mindfulness lens onto our individual experience; our group debriefs highlighted similarities and differences with others and how we are connected with them. All individual voices that arose in personal space (both online and offline) were honoured, then shared and combined into collective inquiry that enabled co-construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1980).

We could observe a shift in our awareness, especially when we remembered to pause and reflect as encouraged by reminders and practices built into the course, as well as class conversation around mindfulness. The reminders from Dr. Aga—to slow down, go deeper, choose tasks and work on them with intention, be present and do the work, seek help and extensions when competing responsibilities were pulling us away

from the dedicated learning space—transformed the way we approached planning and performing our tasks, and how we felt about engaging with those tasks or not being able to engage with them when the going got rough. Gradually, we were also able to focus better and use our time more efficiently to complete our work by the due dates, without feeling pressure or anxiety, even though the course was very challenging.

I entered the program fully aware that I would lose focus and tend to deviate from what I was researching due to my multiple interests in various topics. While this behaviour stimulated me and offered me a plethora of information, it also resulted in lost time and frustration from not completing tasks in my scheduled time. Mindfulness and, particularly, practice of attention and intention helped bring me back to what I was researching so I could finish my work promptly. (S4)

Dr. Aga’s approach with empathy and compassion, such as talking to us privately or as a group to seek understanding and guide us in designing solutions, modelled a supportive and non-judgmental attitude. Instead of feeling upset over our performance, we started controlling negative feelings such as disappointment and demotivation, applying a stronger meta-cognitive lens, and planning to move forward with resilience.

I liked what our instructor said today in our live session: “Ok, you didn’t manage to stay on track for the past week, so try to do better this week! Don’t get stuck on what happened, try to catch up from where you are now...Don’t let the feeling of guilt preoccupy you.” And this is exactly what I plan to do! (S1)

From an instructional design perspective, the two-week forum cycle in the M-learning course offered us the flexibility to choose appropriate times to devote exclusively to the forum discussions without compromising our time and effort from the other course requirements. We continued to advocate for this design in subsequent courses and negotiated with other instructors to implement the two-week forum cycle in their courses.

The class community support, through the combination of synchronous sessions and asynchronous discussions, allowed us to respect other people's truth, their time, and our collective understanding of the successful online learning experience.

Continuing Our Journey

In retrospect, the M-learning course started us on a journey that for the four of us continued beyond the course and the program. We kept evaluating our SRL skills through self-reflection—a metacognitive process enhanced by our interaction, numerous discussions, and exchange of views on how we perceive, plan, and go about our learning tasks. This interactive process informed the way we organized our study, identified and felt about problems and generated solutions, and how we supported our fellow students while, at the same time, learned new strategies from them.

It's been a year since the beginning of the master's and this is the first time I feel so connected to my peers. We are now in a different course, but I am able to transfer the mindfulness practices to it; the study-buddy idea fits well with the mindfulness strategies we developed in the M-learning course. I realize that the two courses are completely different, as well as the facilitation style, but we are the same and the way we work together is not limited to the one course. Even when we work alone, we are a team! I feel lucky and grateful I have met these ladies. (S1)

We wove into our lives moments of retrospection, pause and silence, and attention to the now. That was not limited to our academic sphere of life. It has become a lifelong process preparing us to face life experiences as they come.

During the last semester, I had to face a sudden and significant reduction of my salary. I felt excluded and expelled, I wanted to quit right away, replying back with an angry email. However, having practised mindfulness, I have learned to manage my emotions, and instead of

an angry reaction, I took the time needed, to see things clearly and calm down. But it was only when I actively reflected over this situation, through my journal writing, that I managed to see the whole picture and close this chapter of my life inside me. This activity helped me realize how many things I gained all those years and I felt grateful, and richer from this experience, and less sad for its end. Most important, I felt ready to move on..." (S1)

The Warsaw Conference Experience

Our friendship was established during the M.Ed. courses and moved beyond the formal learning space. Dr. Aga's encouragement and our Greek cohort coordinator's recommendation inspired us to participate in the 3rd World Conference on Blended Learning (WCBL2018) in Warsaw, Poland. Our first co-authorship of the conference paper deepened our practice and discussion of mindfulness. The experience of working on our autoethnography, and completing the paper and its presentation in Warsaw was rewarding but challenging. As S1 noted,

Multitasking often made me stressed, sad, depressed... those feelings used to make me freeze. I could not think, focus, or complete anything. It was terrifying. The centering and breathing practice helps me now to manage my emotions, calm down the panic, and organize the ideas in my head. It helps me observe peacefully the irrelevant thoughts and past experiences triggered by negative feelings. So, whenever things are getting tight, three minutes are enough to find my center, calm down, take a deep breath, and bounce back....that certainly came in handy before the WCBL2018 presentation.

Dr. Aga's guidance was crucial, granting us autonomy and intervening only when needed. This increased our confidence and made us feel both supported and independent, boosting our motivation to participate in similar activities in the future. We supported and advised each other, making it possible to participate together in a process that surpassed our individual capabilities.

We agreed that through this process our SRL skills of task analysis, performance, and self-reflection all evolved, and the only way to realize that was through self-observation without harsh judgement. It is through self-awareness, self-evaluation and refining our attitude and actions, and respecting our boundaries that we were able to keep motivated.

Completing the Master's Program

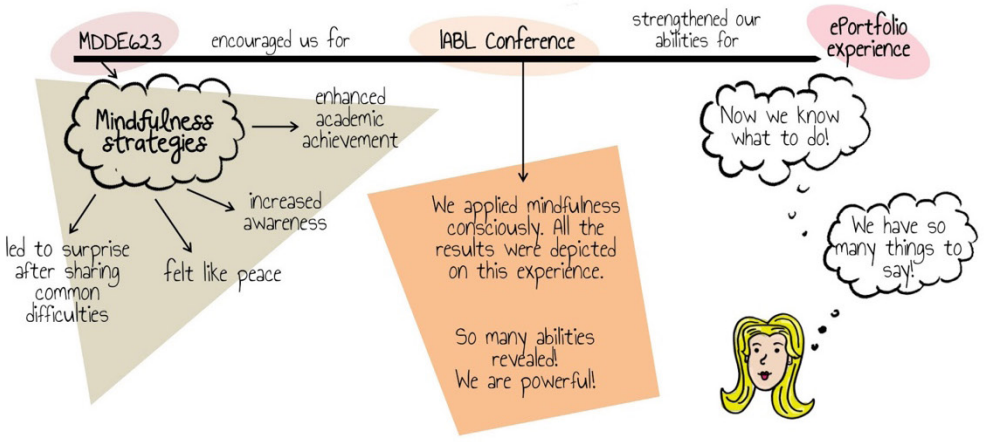
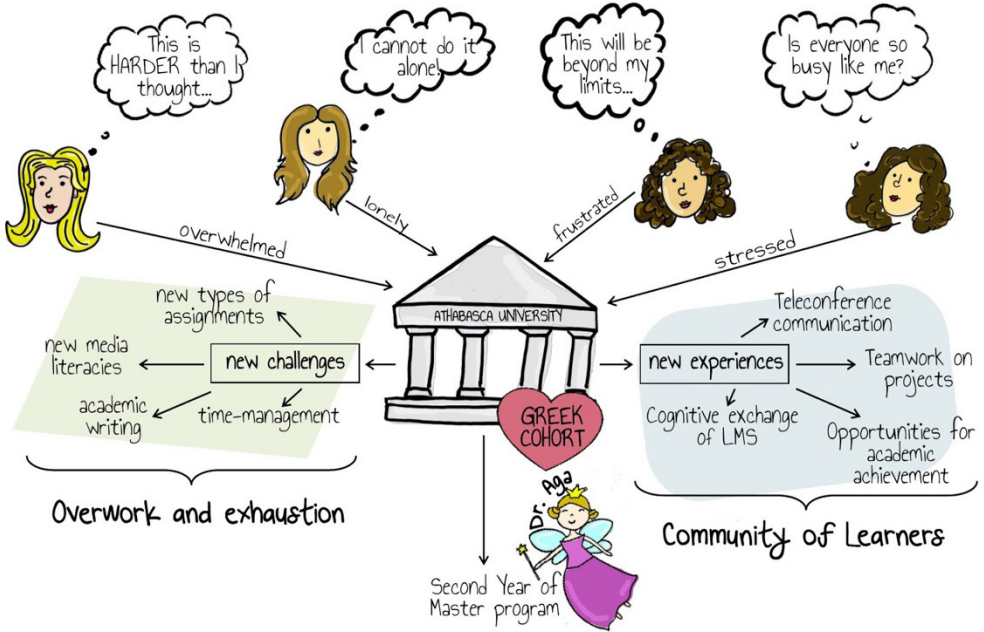
We have now all graduated from the M.Ed. program. Owing to our new attitudes and skills, we completed the final e-portfolio in a timely and effective manner. We could now concentrate on one thing at a time without unnecessary anxiety.

In a magical way, I am now able to find room for more responsibilities and tasks. I feel my mind is clear enough so as to weigh things out and devote to them the time that each task deserves. Participating in extra mindfulness workshops, beyond this program, helped me see the real dimensions of responsibilities without panicking. I can face them as pieces of a puzzle that will be put in the right position when their turn comes. I control them, they don't control me! (S2)

The centering practice and mindful breathing exercise before I would begin my course-related work helped me center into what I was doing, clearing my mind of external stimuli and distractions. As a result, I was able to use my time more efficiently and be more productive, leaving more time to be with my family. The centering practice was particularly helpful during the last term where I was able to complete my e-Portfolio in about two months, graduating ahead of time while still having family time....What a journey (see Figure 1). (S3)

Writing This Paper

Just three months after the WCBL 2018 conference in Warsaw, Dr. Aga invited us to continue our research. The last two academic years were chal-



Overall, we gained tools for lifetime... and...

- Self-regulation
 - Lifelong learning
 - Resilience
 - Self-awareness
 - Academic achievement
 - Time-management
 - Hands-on tasks
- 

We changed as learners, as co-workers, and as individuals, generally

precious friendships with MINDFUL people

Figure 1: Online graduate students' journey enhanced by mindfulness practices as illustrated by the students.

lenging and demanding for all of us. We were looking forward to getting some rest and spending the summer with family and friends whom we had neglected during the period of our studies. When Dr. Aga proposed co-authoring this paper during the summer, we were excited with the idea but exhausted by the accumulated tiredness of the past academic years. Being motivated by the previous experience and the excellent collaboration, we accepted the challenge knowing our capabilities and team's dynamic:

[M]indfulness stimulated my internal motivation to learn and expand beyond what was provided in the program. As a result, I collaborated in this project which has made me feel proud to have been a member of the group. Lastly, mindfulness has taught me that learning stimulated by internal motivation is more efficient and effective and its results are longer lasting. Since the completion of the program, I have been practicing mindfulness...also in decision-making (e.g., whether to participate in this paper). Answers to questions such as "Why am I really considering this?" are clearer with mindfulness as it opens windows to better understanding of myself and my motives—my true intentions. These interventions have supported and enhanced my ability to self-regulate my learning. (S4)

FINDINGS: THEMES AND DISCUSSION

Taylor and Mireault (2008) stressed that mindfulness-based interventions sustain behavioural regulation. They also pointed that mindfulness skills impact the ability to self-monitor one's progress and intervene accordingly. At the same time, Tang et al. (2007) found that mental training methods of mindfulness increase the degree of self-regulation due to their impact on emotional and cognitive performance as well as on social behaviour. Mindfulness may provide learners with strategies to counter the challenges of a demanding educational environment, such as online learning.

In exploration of our new attitudinal, emotional, and behavioural habits of mind that improved our SRL processes which were supported by the mindfulness-based practices, these three key themes emerged: motivation,

self-awareness, and time management. Learners can take ownership of their learning by applying SRL strategies and transforming their mental abilities into academic skills (Zimmerman, 2008).

Motivation

Motivation is essential for learners to self-regulate through all three SRL phases (Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009). Deci, Ryan, and Williams (1996) stressed that intrinsically motivated behaviours are driven by self-interest, rather than external catalysts. Intrinsically motivated behaviours are described as “autotelic...behaviors for which the purpose of the activity is, in a sense, the activity itself” (Deci et al., 1996, p. 167). Extrinsically motivated behaviours are performed to attain a separable consequence (i.e., reward), and are usually prompted by external factors. The process of internalization and integration may transform extrinsic motivation into self-determination. Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan (1991) suggested that self-regulated learners are interested in learning and are self-confident. They are intrinsically motivated, and the high quality of their learning reflects in their personal growth and adjustment. Intrinsically motivated learners value learning and its incentives. Sansone and Harackiewicz (2000) stressed that the key to success is to deal with problems in a flexible manner. For that purpose, it is necessary for learners to cultivate their intrinsic motivation and become creative. Extrinsic motivation as a reward contributes only to the implementation of less creative tasks; thus, self-regulation is highly dependent on internal processes and our awareness of them. It is noteworthy that our observations revealed that, after the implementation of mindfulness practices, there was an increase in our interest in the course and appreciation for its activities inviting our creative thinking and reflection. A greater internal impact, conscious efforts, as well as self-confidence were noted. Correspondingly, there was a significant rise mainly in our intrinsic motivation which transformed us into increasingly self-regulated learners. Mindfulness strategies, such as personalized mindful feedback, mindful listening, meditation, and centering practice were catalytic to consistently striving towards the goals, even in the face of hurdles.

Self-Awareness

The second key theme was self-awareness, on metacognitive and emotional levels, seen as a critical factor that led to our successful self-motivation beliefs, self-observation, self-judgment, and self-reaction practices (Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009). Goleman (1998) defined self-awareness as the ability of the learner to be conscious of one's own skills, emotions, strengths, weaknesses, and biases which lead to self-regulated behaviours and to the ability to identify needs and gaps. We managed to reduce defensiveness and low self-esteem regarding our ability to learn owing to mindfulness practices and supports that prompted us to be aware and keep track of our thoughts, feelings, and "whole-person knowing," and how the process affected us cognitively, emotionally, and energetically. Broadbent and Poon (2015), similarly to Zimmerman and Moylan (2009), described that

SRL is acquired through a triadic interaction between three important characteristics: a) self-observation (monitoring one's actions; seen as the most important of these processes); b) self-judgement (evaluation of one's performance); and c) self-reactions (one's response to performance outcomes). (p. 2)

Accordingly, the observation of our internal processes and outcomes led to the change of attitude and behaviour by increasing focus, intentionality, and mindful choice of strategies (with regard to self and the collective). Principally, we managed to be fully aware of and compare our current situation to the desired one and then set goals accordingly. While this is congruent with the control theory (Carver & Scheier, 1982) where learners use their analytical and synthetical skills in order to process information and consciously plan their steps that will lead them to the appropriate end state, it also emphasizes the value of pausing, self-inquiry, and emotional awareness (Griffith, Steelman, Wildman, LeNoble, & Zhou, 2017).

Zimmerman (2002) suggested that, among other characteristics of self-regulation, it is important for the learner to be capable of selecting the appropriate peers to collaborate with on tasks using self-awareness skills. Huston, Garland, and Farb (2011) found that mindfulness reduced

negative reactivity in communication and, thus, enabled awareness of one's self and peers, resulting in patterns of effective co-operation. The increase in self-awareness positively contributed to the social skills of the group. Additionally, pausing and observation helped us be aware of our impulses and perceptions of self and circumstances and act on them out of conscious choice (Ray, 2002).

Time Management

The third theme, time management, or rather a new attitude and understanding of the role time plays and the need to slow down, proved to be a significant factor in our SRL efforts. Starting with mindful choices, mentioned above, and the awareness of our true needs versus wants or external pseudo-boundaries, the temporal space of online learning had to be re-evaluated. Broadbent and Poon (2015) conducted a systematic review of research from 2004 to 2014 on the correlation between online SRL strategies and academic success. They found that "the application of time management, effort regulation, critical thinking and metacognitive strategies" (p. 12) generated the most significant results in online academic achievement. Dettori, Giannetti, and Persico (2006) found that time management is a vital factor for self-regulated learning since it ensures the adaptability and capability to deal with a variety of demanding situations.

We successfully met the challenge of blending our parallel worlds and combining our work, school, and family obligations once we appreciated that we needed to work authentically and with purpose according to the present circumstances and the larger design of the course, including its scaffolds and supports. During the SRL forethought phase (Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009), we built our plan and set goals based on our motives and according to our expectations, interests, self-efficacious beliefs, and respect for each other. The performance phase included "strategic processes and self-recorded outcomes" (Zimmerman, 2008, p. 179) while the self-reflection phase focused on personal evaluations and accounts that helped us produce an "agreed-on story" of teaching and learning processes beneficial for individuals and the group.

Moreover, the present-moment awareness practice allowed us to appreciate the benefit of monotasking in a digital environment that is de-

signed for multitasking. Particularly, we purposefully isolated tasks and experiences to better comprehend them and engage in them, and thus, complete them successfully.

Our mindfulness practice also supported our time management by reducing the level of stress, and, consequently, improving our functioning processes such as working memory, attention on intention, and focus (Trevisani, 2015). This resulted in a more fruitful learning experience and outcomes supported by our connection and co-operation, despite the constant challenge of lack of time.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned above, the online learning environment might present additional challenges to learners who are not accustomed to its often-misinterpreted flexibility and “less-enforcing” guideposts. The herein presented mindfulness practices were introduced half-way through the M.Ed. program as we were in the process of developing our SRL skills as online learners. The noticeable augmentation of our self-regulation, and awareness of that, led us to believe that it was the mindful behaviour and attitude that promoted the marked positive shift in our learning experience. The findings from the collective analysis of our individual and combined stories point to the significance of mindfulness practices in supporting SRL of DE learners and, as a result, their successful online learning processes and achievements. The chief mindfulness-supported habits that we found to positively affect the forethought, performance, and self-reflection processes (Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009) were enhanced intrinsic motivation, self-awareness, and a mindful approach to time management.

Overall, the introspective nature of the mindfulness practices, individual and group, led to reflective and meaningful learning based on inquiry into self and others; it was adjusted to each unique learner’s context and discovered by each one of us somewhat differently, in a shared space and experience that connected us and rewarded us with a feeling of belonging.

Zimmerman (2003) noted that self-regulation extended beyond “self” processes to include self-coordinated collective learning guided by

personal goals but achieved through others. Based on ongoing communication, we were able to create a cohesive, connected learning community, which enhanced our cooperation as we wove our own worlds into it. Ultimately, we acknowledged each other's experiences as equally contributing to the learning community. The importance of interconnectedness and our interaction through shared spaces, both synchronous and asynchronous, was another vivid theme that came out of this study, but it deserves further exploration and in-depth treatment in a separate publication.

We agreed that this mindfulness-based learning experience promoted our growth as learners and as individuals. Although further research is needed into the various dimensions of SRL and how mindfulness practices interact with them, there is no doubt in our mind that the practices described above had a meaningful impact on our online experience and self-development. Mindfulness is often considered an antidote to stressors in increasingly diverse contexts; however, it is not a panacea for academic achievement. We witnessed how mindfulness supported our DE experience, but the direct impact of individual practices could not be isolated from the interplay of a variety of elements that form an online learning event. We also observed that learners' personality, background, and circumstances influenced their readiness for engaging with mindfulness practices. Time and consistent practice were needed for us to develop and appreciate the gradual shifts in our perspectives as well as behaviours.

Future research will benefit from a systematic identification and review of the many factors that may implicate the long-term impact of mindfulness practices incorporated into online learning and their effectiveness on students' experience and wellbeing.

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